



Piece by Broken Piece by A Voice in the Desert

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Day 1

She's not going back to the cabin – she won't stay there again. She doesn't care what he says, another year is too long and she's safe enough living with Mike. She's tired of hiding herself from the world.

Day 3

Even Mike admits that she can't sleep hidden in his basement forever. Sooner or later his parents will find out – Nancy and he can't keep covering for her.

Betrayal, El thinks, as she slams the door to Hopper's Bronco. See how they like it when she disappears for good this time.

Day 7

"El? Come in. Over."

"El, it's Mike. Please answer. Over"

"El...I'm sorry. I didn't want to kick you out...I just wanted you to be safe. You understand that, right? Over."

Hopper stirred from his chair, glancing over at her behind the butt of his cigarette. "You should at least answer him, kid. He didn't mean any harm."

El just glared at him, her eyes glued to the television. Maybe she'd answer him tomorrow, but she doesn't feel like it tonight.

She goes back to her Eggo dinner. When Mike radios the next day, she ignores him again.

Day 26

It's Saturday, or at least that's what Hopper says when he leaves for the police station, hitching up his belt and stuffing a pack of Marlboros in his back pocket. Normally she'd explore the forest outside the cabin and practice her aim by flinging nuts at some of the squirrels, but winter had set in. Snow blanketed the ground and the temperature plummeted far below freezing. It was too cold to be outside; today was a day for cartoons and practicing the multiplication tables Hopper had brought home the night before.

She'd only just settled in when the sound of voices brought her to her feet. She peered carefully through the drape, her mind already scrambling for places to hide. When the voices finally came into view, her heart froze and her breath caught – it was the boys. Mike led the way, followed by Will, Dustin and Lucas. They'd clearly been wandering for a while, their noses cherry red and dripping, hands shoved deep into the pockets of puffy coats.

She could hear Lucas arguing with Mike, "Nancy was probably lying to us! There's nothing out here. Now let's turn around and head home before we really get lost. El will contact us when she's ready. I'm tired of freezing my butt off out here!"

"Then go home!" Mike roared, "but I'm not leaving until I find El. I need to talk to her. Besides, the cabin has to be around here somewhere, right Will?"

Will nodded, nearly consumed by the coat his mom had undoubtedly dressed him in.

"Jonathan said Hopper's cabin was out here. It's got to be somewhere."

A wave of anger and pent up frustration suddenly overcame her. El couldn't take it any longer. She stomped over to the door and flung it open with a bang. The boys' heads snapped up to find her standing on the porch, arms crossed over her chest. Mike gulped as Dustin shoved him forward.

"Umm...uh, hi?" He offered. When El didn't respond, he tried again, "You didn't answer the radio. We got worried."

He opened his mouth to say something more, but Lucas cut him off.

"Can we come in, El? Please?" He bounced up and down on the balls of his feet. "It's freezing out here."

El regarded them for a long moment. "Stupid," she said.

Lucas rolled his eyes dramatically, "Yeah, we know Mike is stupid. Now let us inside, I'm freezing my ass off."

He pushed past and into the cabin, followed closely by Dustin who gave her a friendly grin – front teeth and all. Will came next, giving her a sheepish smile. Soon, it was just Mike. He looked down at his feet and then back up at her. His eyes were sad, but she could tell he was a bit angry too.

"You didn't respond," he said. "19 days."

As if that was going to explain everything.

El just looked at him. A part of her, a large part, just wanted to forgive him and be done with it. She cared about him too much to be mad forever. But she also wanted him to know how much he hurt her – how much that wasn't ok.

"Look El, I'm sorry...ok? I panicked. And...and...I should've thought about how you would feel."

El looked into his eyes. They danced over her face, worrying at her frown and furrowed brow. She decided to forgive him, but she needed to get her point across first.

She held up one finger, then another. "Friends don't lie. Friends stick together."

Mike swallowed, but nodded. "Always," he said. "I'll always stick by you."

He opened his mouth to say something more, but was cut off by

Dustin's yell, "Hey guys, close the door! Work out your marital problems some other time!"

Mike rolled his eyes but El just turned and walked inside, trusting him to follow.

Friends stick together...always. She liked that.

Day 47

Joyce came over today. Apparently, she'd had the morning off work and Will had steadfastly refused her suggestion that she accompany him to school. She knocked at 10:13am, saying that Hopper had told her where to find her.

El wasn't sure what to think of Will's mom. She hovered and fussed over her, complaining that the cabin was too dirty and constantly asking if she was getting enough to eat. El was only half listening to her lament the lack of vegetables in the fridge when she asked a question that made her turn away from the TV.

"Your name was Jane, right? Or at least, that's what your mother called you?"

El nodded. Mama had named her Jane. It was a nice name. She liked the way it sounded.

"Would you...would you like us to call you that instead?" Joyce ventured. She smiled over at El, as if that would somehow make the question more comfortable.

El stopped and considered. She'd never really thought about it for too long. In her mind, Jane was who she was – who she would've been if Papa hadn't taken her. Jane was the name of the baby girl who never had the opportunity to grow up.

Eleven – that was girl at the Lab. She had the power to move things with her mind, to snap men's necks and summon demons from the Upside Down. Eleven was still inside her, forever a part of her. Jane was not.

But El, El was who she was to Mike, to Hopper. El was the girl who'd saved her friends, rescued Mike from the cliff and sealed the breach to keep the Mind Flayer at bay. El had saved Hawkins, not that many knew that. El was who she wanted to be – and that made all the difference.

She looked over at Joyce and shook her head. "I'm El," she said simply.

And that was that.

Day 51

"Merry Christmas, El!" Hopper called, stomping his feet on porch. "Can you help me with the door?"

Perplexed, El focused on the locks, sliding each of them free before swinging the door open.

Hopper ducked inside, carefully pulling a green tree with him. El cocked her head. It looked like he had cut it from the path near the cabin.

"Well?" He asked, clearly pleased, "what do you think?"

"Why did you cut down the tree?" El asked, "was it in the way?"

"No," Hopper frowned. "It's our Christmas Tree!"

El wrinkled her brow. She wasn't really sure what Christmas was. According to the TV it was about toys, presents and a fat man in a red suit that delivered presents in a sled pulled by what look to be flying deer. She'd also heard the name Jesus and some baby being born in a barn. That didn't sound worthy of celebration to El, but she wasn't quite sure she had the full story.

"Here," Hopper grunted, "help me out and we can talk about it. Grab that stand over there and put it in the corner."

El nodded and dragged the green thing over, watching carefully as Hopper stood the tree in its center and slowly screwed the handles

into place.

"Tilt the tree a bit to the left?" Hopper called.

El gently grabbed the trunk with her mind and held it just so. Hopper stepped back and admired his work.

"I think I've got some lights around here somewhere. Maybe we'll string those up tonight too?"

El shrugged. That sounded nice. She liked the smell of the tree – the pungent pine quickly permeated the small cabin.

"C'mon kid, show a little enthusiasm! We've got to find those lights, otherwise Santa isn't going to leave you any presents."

"Santa?" El asked. "Who is he?"

"He's..." the smile faded from Hopper's face. "Damn kid. Have you ever celebrated Christmas before?"

El shrugged. She's slightly embarrassed. Christmas was apparently another thing she needed to learn about.

Seeing her face, Hopper took a seat on the small sofa and patted the space next to him. "C'mere," he said.

When she had sat, he explained. "Christmas is a holiday that everyone celebrates. It can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people. But for us, it's a time to get together, eat some food and share some presents. I was thinking that maybe we could invite the boys over in a couple days? Maybe Joyce, Jonathan and Nancy too?"

That sounded nice. El liked seeing everyone a lot better than talking to them through the radios. "But who is Santa?"

"Santa..." Hopper trailed off, muttering under his breath. "Santa isn't real – he's just someone parents tell their kids comes on Christmas Eve to deliver presents."

"So they lie?"

"No," Hopper said, running a hand through his hair. "I mean, not exactly."

"But Santa isn't real."

"No, he's not."

"Then they lie."

"Kind of...sort of...Look, kid – sometimes parents will tell their kids one thing in order to protect them."

"So Santa protects them from Christmas?" El asked, thoroughly confused. She couldn't see any reason why a good parent would lie to their kids.

"No, no. Ugh," Hopper groaned. "I'm not very good at this. Look, parents tell their kids that Santa is real because it makes things more fun. It makes the Christmas season seem more magical if you think that when you go to sleep on Christmas Eve that presents are going to suddenly appear in the morning. Santa isn't designed to trick anyone...he just helps everyone be happy."

El wasn't entirely sure what Hopper was trying to say, but she understood the last bit. People wanted to be happy, even if life didn't always seem that way.

"Hopper?" she asked.

"Yeah, kid?"

"Will Santa come to our house this year?"

A wide grin split his face, "I think so. But just to be safe, let's decorate this tree. We wouldn't want him to miss us."

El hopped off the couch to search for the lights. She already felt more excited about Christmas, even if a magical fat man in a red suit who delivered presents seemed a bit silly. She liked to pretend.

Christmas was fun and she was happy.

Day 55

Christmas day came and went with a steady stream of people. El heard Hopper grumbling that there was no way they were going to keep El hidden when half the town kept traipsing through the woods to knock on their door.

First came Joyce with Will and Jonathan in tow. El hadn't seen her since she'd stopped by a few weeks ago. She still looked tired and sad – deep crow's feet cast premature shadows on her eyes. El hadn't known Bob – Bob the Brain as Will liked to say – but he'd made Joyce happy, and that made him worthy of mourning in her mind.

Will was there too, still a little pale but much recovered from his ordeal with the Mind Flayer. His bright smile and inquisitive nature kept him poking around the cabin until Jonathan called him over to give El their present. He smiled brightly and handed her a D&D handbook. He flipped excitedly to a page with a fierce looking woman casting a fireball.

"You're our mage!" he exclaimed, pointing out the character's unique abilities and suggesting that she read the manual so she can play along some time.

El liked that idea. Mike always talked about how much fun they had.

She thanked them both, suddenly overcome by the recognition that she had friends. Friends that brought her presents for no reason other than to celebrate a silly holiday. Suddenly a thought hit her; she set the book on a table and scurried into her room. Ignoring their calls, she felt under the bed until her fingers closed around a dog-eared pad of paper that Hopper had given her to practice her math. Hastily ripping out the few pages she'd actually marked, she sheepishly handed it to Will.

"For your pictures," she said.

A wide smile split Will's face and he pulled her into a hug. He murmured his thanks in her ear, and then the Byers were gone.

Dustin and Lucas came next, a box of Eggos in hand. El was ready

this time. She'd raided her stash of Halloween candy, and proudly presented Dustin with a nougat-filled Three Musketeers. For Lucas, she'd grabbed a handful, trusting that anything chocolate would do the trick.

Mike came later that day, apologizing that his grandmother was in town and his mom wouldn't let him escape until after they'd all had brunch. Nancy stood by the door, a quiet smile on her face.

Since Dustin and Lucas had left, El had thought hard about what to give Mike. She still wasn't sure what they were – the friends but more-than-friends that sometimes kissed and other times violently disagreed. Mike looked at her for a long time, and El suddenly felt a bit self-conscious. She'd slipped into a dress and managed to wrangle her hair with a small red ribbon. She thought Mike might like it – the girl on the TV had looked pretty wearing it. Now she just felt kind of silly.

She turned and sat on the couch, waiting for Mike to join her. When he sat down, he pressed a box into her hands. It was poorly wrapped, the green and gold paper mastered by far too many pieces of tape. A red bow sat jauntily in a corner. El's heart warmed – it was clear he'd wrapped it himself.

Carefully, she pulled the bow off and set it to the side. She wanted to save it for later, maybe put it with the small collection of belongings she'd accumulated on the low nightstand next to her bed. Then, gently, she began to remove the paper, exposing a simple cardboard box. Sliding it back, she revealed a radio much like the one she'd seen the boys use regularly.

"I wanted you to have one too – your own," Mike explained. "I know you can use Hopper's, but this one is yours. That way we can always get in touch."

"Friends stick together," El repeated. "Always."

Mike nodded, a smile replacing the anxious look he'd worn earlier. "And look, here," he said, taking the radio from El's hands, "is our channel – Dustin, Lucas and me. Now you can listen to all our conversations. And this one," he turned another dial, "can be ours. So

if you want to talk to me – just me – you can."

El nodded, taking the radio back and practicing flipping between the two channels. She stopped on the latter. "Just us, right?"

Mike nodded, a light blush dusting his freckled face. "If you want, yeah."

"Yeah," El said, luxuriating in the way Mike's words made her feel special.

She let her head tilt and rest against Mike's shoulder.

"I didn't get you anything." The words were gone before she could take them back. The warmth she felt moments earlier had abruptly left, replaced by the cold emptiness of disappointment – a feeling she knew all too well.

Mike sat back, his brow furrowing, "that's ok, El! I didn't expect anything...I mean, you probably didn't even know what Christmas was. Besides, you saved the whole town – everyone should be getting you presents, not the other way around!"

"I wanted to," she said, still ashamed. "I found something for Will and Dustin and Lucas. But I didn't have anything good enough for you."

Mike shook his head, "You're here and you're alive. That's enough for me."

El frowned. That wasn't good enough for her. She wanted to give Mike a present more than anyone else. She didn't care that she'd only just learned about Christmas – she was smart, she'd figured out what to give the other boys. But Mike was harder to figure out and she didn't want to simply give him something she found under her bed. She wanted it to be special, meaningful. She wanted him to remember it.

Sensing her frustration, Mike laid a hand on her knee. "El, it's fin-"

Whatever he was going to say was cut off by El's lips. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him once, then twice more. His lips felt nice – she wished she could kiss him more often.

Mike's eyes had gone wide as saucers and he rested his forehead against hers.

"What was that for?" he asked, missing Nancy's quiet laughter behind them.

"Present," she said simply.

Mike shook his head, mind still half dazed. "God you're beautiful."

"Pretty?" she asked.

Mike blushed. "More than pretty."

They stayed like that for a moment more before Nancy called. They moved apart, both missing each other's warmth. Mike gave El's hand a final squeeze.

"Don't forget about our channel," he said. Then he got up and left.

El sat on the couch for a while longer. She still wasn't sure what she and Mike were, and she still wasn't entirely sure why anybody celebrated Christmas, but for now she didn't care. Tonight she was warm and happy and beautiful.

Day 85

The lab was screaming again. Its pain and suffering seeping into her bones, an open wound that festered and tore at her insides. Papa would be mad. He didn't like the blood. It stained the clean white floors.

The harsh fluorescent bulbs buzzed loudly in the silence.

She'd been here before, she knew that much. But the sound of the lights – it kept her from thinking clearly, kept her from remembering. There was a door handle in front of her, its silver unmarred. She grabbed for it and it turned, slowly. The room inside was dark, and for a moment, she stood in the opening. Light from the hallway spilled around her, piercing the gloom. Her shadow a stark silhouette against the ground.

A hand scrabbled for the light switch, a hard knob against the smooth wall. She paused, something telling her to wait. She listened, trying to block out the buzzing of the lights.

Then she heard it – the scratching in the corner.

She waited a moment more.

Suddenly it wasn't just scratching, but ripping and tearing. Then claws on tile. A snarl splitting the gloom.

El flipped the light switch to find a scene from her worst nightmares. Two demodogs surrounded a mangled, bloody corpse. Half its leg was already gone, the remainder partially separated from its blue jean pant's leg.

There was blood everywhere – the floor, the wall, the ceiling. Whoever it was hadn't died easily – or slowly.

The bolder of the monsters roared and took a running leap toward her. A flick of her hand sent it flying into the wall, its neck snapping on impact. The second let out a low growl, haunches tense, ready to spring. The half-eaten leg forgotten on the floor.

El grabbed this one's neck, lifting it off the ground, watching its four legs desperately paw the air. She held it there for a moment, listen to it pant as she slowly constricted its airways. The short, gasping breaths were electrifying, empowering.

She waited, enjoying its suffering. The demon deserved it.

Gradually, the beast stilled and its body hung limp. El released her hold and the corpse slumped to the floor.

Unbidden, her feet approached the half-eaten body. It was small – a boy if she wasn't mistaken. It must've been another one of Papa's test subjects. There weren't many other boys at the lab.

But somewhere, in the back of her mind, an alarm bell started ringing. Louder and louder until the rush of killing the demodogs was replaced by an overwhelming panic – a need to know who was lying on the floor before her.

She wanted to reach down and touch the body, but there was too much blood. Not enough person left to grab. But the hair – the matted mop was black, stained and glistening. She knew that hair – she'd seen it many times before.

Gently, her mind reached out and turned the head to its side.

And there, eyes glassy, staring blankly ahead, hazy with pain and frozen in terror was-

"MIKE!"

Gasping, El shot up in bed, her damp sheets puddling around her waist. Before she even had time to think, she was grabbing for the radio on her nightstand.

"Mike! Mike!" She called in between breaths.

Her chest rose and fell, panting. She tried to focus. In. Out. In. Out. In. Ou-

"El!?" Mike's panicked voice echoed in the stillness. "What's wrong? Are you ok? It's 2:15 in the morning. Do you need me to come over?"

"I saw you," she sobbed. "The lab. Dead. One leg"

"One leg? What? Wait...El, did you have a nightmare?"

"You were dead," she repeated, tears running down her face as she rocked in place, knees tucked to her chest.

"El," Mike's voice was clear, calm. Sleep suddenly gone. "I'm not dead. You just had a nightmare. It wasn't real. We saw each other on Christmas, remember?"

El sniffled. A part of her knew Mike was telling the truth, but in her mind's eye she could still see his bloodied face and mangled body. His eyes staring, lifeless, back at her.

"El. El," Mike repeated. "I'm here. Listen to my voice."

"I...I hear you."

"Good," he soothed.

El wiped her face with her sleeve, drying her eyes and wiping the snot from her chin. She felt her heartbeat begin to slow. She looked around the room, registering the rough wooden walls and the bed in which she sat. This wasn't the lab. It wasn't a dream.

"Mike?" She asked.

"Yeah El, I'm here."

"You have both legs, right?" It was a silly question, but one El needed to ask.

A low chuckle sounded from the radio, "Yeah, I do. And I'll prove it to you tomorrow."

"Yes," El said. That sounded like a good idea. Seeing him would help the image in her mind go away. "Mike?" She asked again.

"Hmmm?" She could tell he was getting sleepy again.

"Stay?" There was a part of her that needed to know she wasn't alone. Especially tonight.

Mike, it seemed, understood.

"Always."

Day 103

There was a knock at the door. Tentative, not like one of the boys pounding the wood, demanding to be let in.

Knock. Knock.

"El?" Quietly. A girl's voice.

She heard the feet shuffle, like their owner was debating simply walking away.

Curious, El looked up from the couch and unlatched the top lock. The

feet stopped.

"El?" The voice said again. "It's Max...from school. Can I come in? Hopper asked me to bring over some homework for you to look at."

El frowned. She didn't want to do school work, but as everyone seemed to remind her, she wouldn't be able to go to school with the boys if she couldn't keep up with them in class. It was a compromise – a halfway happy – that kept El returning to her books each night.

Reluctantly, El finished unlocking the door and allowed Max to step into the cabin. She hadn't seen the freckled red-head since the Snow Ball even though Lucas mentioned her a time or two. It seemed they were "dating" – a concept that still eluded El but something she mentally chalked up to Lucas and Max being more than friends. There were times she wondered if she and Mike were dating too.

Max smiled and eagerly looked around the cabin. Her initial tentativeness quickly forgotten.

"This place is so cool," she exclaimed. "I wish I could live here. Want to trade?"

El cocked her head. Why would she want to do that? She didn't love living out here in the woods, but she liked Hopper and still got to see her friends – that was better than living with strangers.

"No," she said simply.

Max dropped the books on the table with a loud clunk, her smile drooping.

"I don't blame you. I wouldn't want to either."

"Why?" El asked.

Max paused for a moment. "My father and step-brother...they aren't the easiest to be around."

That made some sense to El. She understood what it was like to have a difficult parent. "Your papa...not good?"

Max huffed a small laugh, "Yeah, I guess you could say that. I mean, I think he means well, but he doesn't know how to show it. There's a lot of yelling."

El cringed. She didn't like yelling either. It made it hard to think... hard to concentrate.

"Anyway," Max continued. "I've got some math here, a little science – looks like biology – and a reading assignment. Yuck."

El agreed. She didn't mind math. The numbers all had rules that she could follow, rules that made sense. Reading was much harder – there were silent letters and exceptions everywhere. Sometimes she just wanted to chuck her books out into the snow.

Max sensed her discomfort and flopped next to her on the couch. "Anything good on TV? Mom always watches the evening news – it's boring as hell."

El shrugged. There wasn't much on and she'd been bored for a while now. She wanted Hopper to come home so they could have dinner. The TV droned on, both girls sitting and watching without seeing. El fidgeted in her seat. She didn't know Max very well and wasn't sure what to do. When the boys were here, they usually suggested the activity. And the few times Nancy stopped by were full of her leading the conversation. But Max... her presence made El's insides feel all twisted up.

"You were there, weren't you?" Max's sudden question broke the tense silence.

"Where?" El asked, brow furrowed. A pit in her stomach opened, she had a feeling she knew where this conversation was going and she didn't like it.

"The gym. When I was skateboarding with Mike?"

El kept silent as Max continued, ignoring the other girl's discomfort.

"Because let's be real. I'm a badass on the skateboard and the gym floor – it's not exactly rough enough to cause a wipeout. It's like, one moment we're talking and I'm skating, then all of a sudden something

yanks the board out from under my feet. Then Mike gets super weird and rushes out into the hall. I mean, lots of strange shit seems to happen in Hawkins, but I don't think the Mind Flayer was involved in this one."

Max finally looked at El, the look on her face halfway between a challenge and an inquiry.

El paused for a long moment. She thought about lying, about outright denying it. Maybe she could just tell Max to leave – pretend like she was going to use her powers to scare her off. It would be easier, at least until Hopper or Mike found out. And Max was Lucas' more-than-friend. El liked Lucas. She didn't want to hurt him. Besides, she didn't think that would get rid of the uncomfortableness in her gut.

She returned Max's stare. "Not the Mind Flayer," she agreed.

"So you did it?" Max challenged.

"Yes." El was pleased that saying it out loud made her stomach feel a bit better.

Max looked caught between hurt and angry. "Why?"

That was the question that El really didn't want to answer. She knew part of the reason she'd tripped Max that day, but she didn't really know the rest. She'd just acted – she hadn't spent much time thinking it through.

"Was angry," she shrugged.

Max frowned, "Angry at me? Why? You didn't even know me!"

El looked at the floor, her hands in her lap.

"Not angry at you. Angry at me."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Max sat back against the couch, some of her anger evaporating.

"You were Mike's friend." El explained.

Max met El with a blank stare. "Were you jealous of me and Mike? Because that's ridiculous. I mean, I like the little shit well enough, but seriously? Gross. Besides, it was obvious he was still obsessed with you."

"Jell – us?" She sounded out the word. "What is jell-us?"

"When you want something the other person has," Max explained. "Or you want to be where the other person is."

El thought about it for a moment. "Yes. I was jell-us." The knot in her stomach loosened again. "Sorry."

Max blew out a breath. "You're not very good at this, are you?"

El cocked her head. Friends didn't lie – she knew that. What more did Max want?

The confusion must've shown on her face, because Max blew out a long breath. "Whatever. But you and me, we're good now, right? Because I don't want any more of this shit. Friends?" She stuck out a hand like El had seen the boys do on occasion they disagreed.

El nodded and grasped Max's hand. It was a nice hand, she thought. A little rough but warm.

"Friends."

"Good, because I need to ask you something about Lucas..."

Day 142

7:13. The blinking lights on the clock he had set on the table taunted El. 7:14. She glanced at the door. He still wasn't home. 7:19. The TV dinners El made had long since gone cold, their tin foil tops limp against the chicken pot pie and turkey meatloaf supreme. The phone remained silent; the television buzzing without an audience. The woods outside were dark and foreboding. El strained to hear the throaty growl of the Bronco, the heavy crunch of boots. She looked at the clock again. 7:47. At 8:03 she ate a candy bar. It didn't help the gnawing worry in her stomach.

At 9:13 El pulled the comforter off her bed and dragged it to the couch. She tried to watch the television – to find anything to take her mind off the sick fear curdling within her – that the bad men had found him while she huddled safe inside. The TV antenna slipped out of focus. El didn't fix them.

CRASH!

El shot up, startled by the sound. She waited, her heart in her throat.

The noise came again, a thundering beat against the porch outside. Maybe it was a bear? Mike had said there weren't any bears in the Indiana woods, but ever since he'd shown her a picture they'd remained on her mind. Maybe one got lost? Or escaped from...what had Mike called it? A zoo?

She glanced at the clock. 12:24. It was the middle of the night. She'd fallen asleep waiting for him to come home. A muffled curse came from outside the door. At least now she knew it wasn't a bear.

Carefully, El stood up. Waiting for the telltale knock that Hopper had insisted they learn.

The knock came moments later, firm and consistent, but not the rhythm that had been pounded into her head. She waited, the door bolted shut.

The knocking came again, more insistent this time.

"El? C'mon...let me in. It's freezing out here." El's heart leaped, that certainly sounded like Hopper, but his voice...it was rougher than usual, the words struggling to get out.

She approached the door. She wanted to open it, but Hopper had insisted that she never open the door unless she heard the knock. That was still the most important thing – it kept her safe and kept the bad men away.

"Shit. Shit. Shit. The kid is probably asleep," the voice mumbled to itself. "Dammit Jim. You fucking idiot."

Jim. That was Hopper's first name. He'd taught her about that after

she'd asked him why he sometimes called Mike "Wheeler". Hopper had taken the time to explain that everyone had at least two names – people usually only used the first one, but every so often the last name – or family name, as he called it – worked as well. She'd asked him about her last name, but now that she thought of it, he'd never really answered the question.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK. "C'mon kid! Open up!"

There was a long pause, a rustling of paper and....glass? Then a loud thump as if Hopper had sat down, his back against the door. Then silence – Hopper seated and mumbling under his breath; El standing just on the other side, contemplating the locks with pained indecision.

12:47. The clock burned brightly. El made a choice. She cocked her head and the first bolt slid out of place.

"El?" Hopper must've heard, because there was a lot of stumbling and cursing as he struggled to stand. "That you?"

"Do the knock," El said.

"The what? Shit...kid...it's late, just let me in."

"The knock," El insisted. This was very important. He'd said never to let anyone in unless she heard the knock. "Remember."

There was a pause, then two short knocks followed by a harder one.

"Wrong," El said.

"Fuck."

Knock-Knock-Knock...Knock...Knock.

"No."

Hopper made a sound, halfway between a cough and a hiccup. "El... I'm sorry. I promise I'll do the knock in the morning. But it's late, I'm tired and my...my... head hurts. I can't do this right now. Just...let me in...please?"

El regarded the door carefully. She was certain that it was Hopper standing on the porch, but she didn't understand why we couldn't do something as simple as remember their code. He'd done it hundreds of times before and had always insisted that she never ever let anyone in who didn't know their knock.

She decided to try one more time.

"Why?"

There was a loud sigh and a quiet thunk against the door as Hopper laid his forehead against the old wood.

"Because I'm a stupid son of a bitch, that's why." There was a slosh of liquid, then he continued. "Because it's been seventeen years and I swear I'm the only one who remembers. No one else in this town gives a shit. They're just happy to forget." He paused again, "I'll...I'll stay out here. I wouldn't want to be around me either."

El couldn't take Hopper sounding so forlorn....so defeated. She'd always known him as a source of indomitable strength and will – he'd promised to be there for her. This was an opportunity for her to return the favor.

Carefully, she undid the locks, pausing only for a moment as the last one clicked into place. The door slowly swung open to reveal a disheveled Hopper, eyes red and bloodshot, leaning against the doorframe. His coat hung open despite the winter chill and dry snot had begun to freeze against his cheek. A brown paper bag was wrapped around the bottle in his left hand.

He glanced up, a whisper of surprise crossing his face. El stood back from the doorway and looked at him in expectation.

Hopper pushed himself off the doorframe, wobbling and nearly crashing into the other side before steadying himself. He took a tentative step into the cabin, his eyes glassy and unfocused.

El had seen a lot of this when she was in Chicago. Kali explained that when people drank too much alcohol they got drunk, and it made them say and do stupid things. It made them forget. What El didn't

know was why Hopper wanted to get drunk. She knew he had a beer on occasion, but she'd never seen him get like this.

He took another step and staggered, his bottle rising violently, sloshing liquid everywhere as he struggled to catch himself. El was at his side in an instant, her small shoulder under his much larger one.

He smiled down at her and El winced. His musty breath was heavy with drink.

"You're a good kid," he muttered. He went to muss her hair like he usual but only stopped when he realized he couldn't do it without smacking El in the face with the bottle. Shrugging, he took another swig.

"The couch," El said, hoping he'd get the message and move in that direction before she had to use her powers to keep them upright.

Hopper nodded, tipping dangerously before staggering in the general direction of the low couch they kept in the living room. He stumbled again, nearly kicking a chair before heaving himself down. He leaned back, feet sprawled on the small table in front of him, and took another drink.

He looked at El. "You should be asleep."

El frowned dangerously and pointed at the clock, "One zero two. You said Five one five. You didn't call, so I waited."

Hopper looked at the clock for a long moment, head swaying slightly. He sniffed loudly, "Shit, El. I...I...lost track of time."

"No," El said, getting increasingly upset, "you don't forget. Not five one five. Never five one five."

Hopper seemed to shrug, his eyes going distant as he brought the bottle to his lips again. "Just go to bed kid. It's late."

Suddenly the bottle stopped moving, frozen in mid-air. Hopper frowned, tugging at the glass until his addled brain caught up.

"Hey! No powers! Let it go!"

"No! You don't forget!

"Well I forgot tonight, ok! Now leave me alone. Go to bed, go outside, I don't care. Just leave me alone!" Hopper gave the bottle one more half-hearted pull before standing, dangerously off-balance. He used the back of the couch to propel him toward the refrigerator.

The suspended bottle dropped abruptly, shattering to pieces on the hard wood floor. El ignored the crash and tried not to wince as alcohol flew everywhere. She glared at Hopper, daring him to say something.

But the drunken man ignored her, focused on the refrigerator. He gave the door a tug, only to find it held in place as well.

"EL!" He turned, his anger returning.

"NO!" El screamed, tears beginning to stream down her face.

The walls began to vibrate, cups and dishes rattling in their cabinets.

He promised he would always call, that he would never miss Five-One-Five. It was important – he promised. And his stupid drink made him forget.

The blood from her nose began to curl around her lip. Drip. Drip. It splashed on the bare floor below.

He forgot about her. Forgot about the rules. Forgot about everything. She didn't understand what he was doing, but she wasn't going to pretend it was ok. Rules, as he loved to remind her, were for her safety. Now it was her turn to remind him that the rules were there for him too.

CRASH!

A mug tipped off the counter and exploded against the floor. The windows began to shake, a slow crescendo until they too seemed ready to crack.

El could feel the darkness closing in. Not the Upside Down, but the hate, the anger, the guilt. The disappointment heaped upon her by

almost every adult in her life. The kind that screamed she wasn't good enough. She was a failure. She was worthless. It was a vicious cycle that left El feeling hollow and lost. Soon Hopper would cast her aside as well. He'd find a better kid – someone who wasn't has much trouble as her.

Strong arms suddenly found her in the eye of her personal hurricane. Stale breath wrinkled her nose as Hopper half-stumbled the two of them to the couch. He collapsed upon it, pulling El's head to his chest. Whatever he was saying was lost in the screaming in her head, the pounding rush that drowned out the world.

Slowly, she found herself returning. Anchoring herself to Hopper's steady breathing and the physical presence of his arms. Gradually, the episode passed and everything stilled. She slumped half against his chest and half against the back of the couch, exhausted and absolutely spent.

"El," there was a little more clarity to his voice than before. He spoke slowly, as if his brain were struggling to clearly define each word. "El...I'm sorry."

She wanted to say something, to scream and yell and pound his chest, but instead she just found herself tired.

"I don't have a good excuse," Hopper continued, his voice weary. "At least not one that accurately reflects how much I care about you. I promised I would never forget, and I did. And that's a pretty shitty thing to do."

El nodded, eyes half closed as he spoke.

"But today is the one day that I really want to forget."

El paused, this was new. Hopper had never mentioned wanting to forget a specific day.

"I never told you this, but I fought in a war. In a faraway shithole of a country called Vietnam. It was supposed to be simple – free the people from the Commie bastards who wanted to run the place."

El had no idea where Vietnam was, but she'd heard Commies

mentioned once or twice on the TV. She didn't know who they were or what they did, but everyone seemed to think they were bad men.

Hopper continued, eyes staring off at a cobwebbed corner of the cabin. "We'd been there over a year and barely seen any action. Our squad was running around re-supplying different companies – staying out of the thick jungle as much as we could. Sure it was hot and sticky, and the mosquitos were the size of a horse, but we'd done alright. We only had another six months before we shipped back stateside."

Hopper paused again, hand reaching down for a bottle that wasn't there. He frowned at the inconvenience, and released a deep breath.

"Then today happened. Well...today seventeen year ago. It was a simple patrol – me and Lieutenant Daniels were scouting the far edge of our camp. We got distracted and decided to explore a stream we'd seen earlier. Take a piss, cool our feet in the water. The Sarge would never know – at least that's what we told ourselves. We'd been there not fifteen minutes when we began to smell fire and see the smoke curling over the treetops. We ran. Only when we got closer did we heard the screams. Somehow the enemy had gotten past us and into camp."

Hopper's eyes misted over, his left-hand curling into a fist. He was seeing without seeing – remembering, El had been told. Eyes facing forward but mind somewhere else. El was tempted to reach over and take his much larger hand in her own.

"By the time we got back, they were gone. They'd gutted the sentries and tossed grenades in our tents. Anyone else, they just cut down with machine guns. Then, when they were done, when our men – my brothers – were lying there, bleeding out on that damned jungle floor, they burned them. They took our napalm and poured it over the camp: the bodies, the men moaning in the dirt. They lit a match and walked away.

By the time Daniels and I got back, there was nothing we could do. But we saw it all – I still can smell them. The bodies. Burning."

El shivered. She'd seen bodies before – she'd killed – but nothing like

this. This...war. It sounded worse than even Papa.

"The Army transferred Daniels to a different regiment. They put me under a commander far away from the front lines – I never sniffed combat again. I suppose they thought it a mercy, but it was hell. I couldn't do anything to avenge my friends."

Tears began to roll down his face. Silent and steady.

"Daniels...he didn't do so well. Army said he just snapped one day. Ran off into the jungle and never returned. I like to think he sent a few of them to Hell before he went to meet the Creator."

He took a sleeve and wiped it over gummy eyes and a running nose. He raised an imaginary bottle, "This is for you Daniels," he mumbled, "and you Sarge. The boys. Wherever you are, give'em hell."

After a moment, he let his arm fall. He looked over at El. "Sorry kid, I'm a shit dad."

El looked at him: watery eyes, puffy face, snot dried crossways over his cheek, breath reeking of alcohol. Tonight was not Jim Hopper's finest moment. He'd screwed up and she would let him hear about it in the morning. But now, El understood, wasn't the time to remind him.

She reached out and squeezed his hand once, her eyes meeting his as they rapidly drooped toward sleep. She got up off the couch and padded into Hopper's bedroom, coming back with a blanket. She gently laid it over his, ignoring the snores that were already echoing throughout the cabin.

She walked back to her room. She was tired. It was finally time to sleep.

Day 173

Spring finally comes and El loves it. Hopper opens the windows in the stuffy cabin, letting in the light, airy breeze. It tickles El's nose and dances in her lungs. She feels alive, like she's waking from a long hibernation.

Then, as Indiana Springs often do, the warm sun unexpectedly gives way to Winter once again. The boys shriek that El needs to come enjoy the snow one last time before its gone. But El just looks at the budding trees and spritely crocuses and shakes her head. She's tired of the cold. She's ready for summer.

Quietly, she goes back to the television.

Day 194

The cabin had an unexpected visitor this afternoon: Jonathan dropped by after school to show Hopper pictures of the high school. Apparently the usual student graffiti had morphed into outright vandalism and the principal had called the police. El wasn't exactly sure what had been written, but if Hopper's increasingly poor language was anything to go by, it was pretty bad.

When he finished, Jonathan came over to see her, perching awkwardly on one end of the couch. He seemed tense, his back not fully resting against the cushions, his feet firmly planted on the ground.

El regarded him for a long moment and blinked twice. On the second he stopped fiddling with the camera in his lap. "Would you like to take a few pictures?" He blurted.

El tilted her head. She remembered being fascinated by the picture-taking device when she first saw it. Amazed that, if what Jonathan said was true, the tiny reel of black film inside could be developed in a dark room into the pictures she so enjoyed.

She looked at the camera in his hand – big, black with lots of buttons. It was rather intimidating, but Jonathan appeared to have mastered most of them.

"Yes," she decided, answering Jonathan's question. She wanted to try.

Jonathan's smile, tentative at first, finally blossomed, and they sat side by side for nearly half an hour as he explained the nuances of the device.

Finally, he looked over and said, "Do you want to try and take some pictures? I can get them developed for you at school."

El nodded eagerly and the two of them walked onto the porch. The warm spring air tickled her face as she gazed with renewed interest at a landscape she saw daily. The tall, majestic oak trees, craning their budding branches toward the sun; the small white and purple crocuses poking through rich and creamy loam; the red-breasted robin, hopping eagerly from branch to branch, chirping joyously; even the weathered fence post had a sudden charm that El thought worthy of consideration.

Jonathan stood at her side and chuckled as her eyes darted from place to place.

"It's amazing how photography opens your eyes," he smiled. "It broadens your view – lets you see what's really there. That's why I like it," he looked down at El. "It gives me an appreciation for things that others take for granted. And sometimes, when they see my pictures, it gives them that perspective too."

El considered Jonathan's words. Why was she only seeing the woodpecker today? Why were shadows cast by the trees high overhead suddenly dancing men and roaring lions? Had she truly been missing the wonders of her front porch for all the months she'd been inside? She didn't want that to happen again.

So, with Jonathan's guidance, she began documenting the trees, the birds and the shadows. Each petal and budding leaf was something special and worthy of remembrance. She was so focused, so enjoying herself, that a loud whirring startled her into nearly dropping the camera.

"Here! Careful!" Jonathan exclaimed, his hands gently supporting the device. "It's fine, it just means that roll of film is full. I'll take it to school and get it developed later this week. Then we can look at all the pictures you took."

El smiled. That would be fun.

"What else do you want to photograph?" He asked, his eyes eager and

dancing as they walked back inside. He began carefully packing his camera bag as he listened.

El thought for a long moment, marveling at the camera's ability to bring permanence to something her eyes beheld only for an instant. She thought of the flowers, the woods, the cabin – even Mike and the boys – before finally settling on an answer.

"The lab," she said simply.

"The lab!?" Jonathan looked shocked, slightly appalled at her suggestion.

"But why would you want to do that!?"

El was quiet for a moment. Then she looked him straight in the eye. "Because some things shouldn't be forgotten."

Silence. Then something approaching understanding passed between them.

He nodded, "Maybe we'll go next week?"

They did.

A week after that Jonathan returned with those photographs, El slipping out to grab them before Hopper saw.

In the privacy of her room that evening, she regarded them each carefully, eyes flitting over the place that still haunted her life.

The building looked flat, lifeless – nothing like El remembered. She decided that pictures do more than show you things you don't want to forget. They can hide things people wanted to ignore. They're still fake. Not real.

El stuck the pictures deep in her dresser drawer and didn't look at them again.

Hopper was being weird.

El was used to the big man's gruff, somewhat mercurial temperament. She was used to the near omnipresent Marlboro and the rattling of the Bronco. She'd even become accustomed to his smiles – the ones that started at the corner of his mouth before gradually working their way across into a fully-fledged grin that lit up his face and made him look ten years younger.

But what she wasn't used to was him fussing.

It had started in the morning before he left for work. He'd been pacing, muttering to himself. The cabin boards creaking and groaning with each step. When she stuck her head out of her room, hair askew in an impressive bird's nest, and scowled at him for waking her up, he'd quickly stuffed something into his back pocket and awkwardly smiled at her. El wished she'd confronted him then, but unfortunately she'd been too tired, opting to roll her eyes and go back to bed instead.

Hours later, when she finally pulled herself from her blankets' warm embrace and padded into the kitchen, she'd nearly forgotten his antics. The comfortable, sleepy half-dazed state of her mind focused on the beautiful delight set before her – a stack of their "Super Special Occasion Dessert Eggos" crested the table. The heaping stack was peaked with whipped cream and dotted with chocolate chip morsels and a smattering of small colored sugary bits called sprinkles. Mouth watering and mind gloriously blank, El upended the bottle of syrup, smiling as she drew swirls and faces until the towering stack was nearly afloat in a moat of sugary deliciousness. The first bite could've qualified as a religious experience. It also meant that it took her about half the plate to notice the note beside it.

Dotted with syrup and a spot of whipped cream, El carefully extracted the lined paper from beneath her plate. It was written in Hopper's messy scrawl.

El,

Happy Birthday! I hope you slept well and enjoyed the Eggos!

Before you frown and ask why we're celebrating, I know today probably isn't your real birthday, but since we don't know, Mike and I decided to choose today. You love the summer and school is still a couple months off, so we figured today was as good as any. I have to give the kid credit – sometimes he has a few decent ideas.

So here's what I want you to do. Finish your Eggos, then go brush your teeth. Can't have you getting any cavities – those are way more painful than they're worth, trust me. Second, relax and enjoy some TV – I'm going to get off work around 2:30 to come home and help get things ready. Some of your friends (yes... Mike is coming) will be there around 3:30 for a party. We'll play some games, eat some food and open a few presents. Hopefully it's a lot of fun.

Congrats on turning 14! See you in a bit.

Hopper

El read the letter a second time, then a third. Eyes scanning each word, each sentence, to make sure she wasn't imagining things. She'd never celebrated a birthday. Brenner had never acknowledged such things, and now that she was out...El supposed she had just assumed that she'd age along with everyone else. When they turned 14, she would say she was 14. Simple. Easy. No fuss.

But this was more than simply suggesting she was a year older, and different than celebrating a holiday alongside everyone else – this was a day just for her. Her birthday. The thought of it made her chest hurt, squeezing that place in its center until she wasn't sure she could breathe. She wanted it to stop all the while wishing it would never end.

She wasn't sure how long she sat in silence, simply re-reading the letter, the syrup and whipped cream now joined by a smattering of tears, but when she looked up, the clock blinked 11:37. Deciding that she probably should get on with her day (she wasn't missing an opportunity to watch her soaps after all), she carefully set the letter aside and attacked the Eggos with renewed vigor. In a matter of minutes they were gone, the plate was washed and set to dry, teeth hurriedly brushed, and the TV tuned to her favorite channel. El smiled – it was her birthday!

That was how Hopper found her nearly three hours later, sprawled out on the small couch, eyes heavy after the Eggo-induced sugar crash. The sticky heat of an Indiana summer encouraged a nap hidden from the sun. El looked up and blinked, surprised that Hopper was home so early. The big man smiled and set two grocery bags down on the counter, as El's brain finally caught up to the letter she'd read that morning.

"Happy birthday, kid!" Hopper grinned. "How's the day been?"

El shot from the couch and crashed into his larger frame, small arms wrapping around his middle as she pressed her cheek to his chest. In that moment, there was nothing she loved more than the faint aroma of Marlboros mixed with the pungent undercurrent of mostly dry sweat.

Hopper chuckled, his arms around El, one hand absentmindedly stroking her hair. El didn't want the embrace to end, but when she finally looked up, she thought there might've been tears mirrored in his eyes as well.

"I stopped by the grocery store on the way home," he said, nodding at the bags he'd set on the counter. "I figured everyone would be fine with a few hamburgers before we have cake?"

"Cake?" El's eyes got wide at the thought of the sugary treat and suddenly she was at the counter, carefully lifting the store-bought confection from the bag. She set it down and stared reverently. The white icing was dotted with multicolored sprinkles and frosting piped in a lazy garland around the edge. In careful, practiced script the words "Happy Birthday!" were scrawled across its middle. She had to keep herself from jumping up and down. She could barely believe it – her first birthday cake!

"After dinner El, not before," Hopper teased.

Her mock-squint lasted only half a second before she turned her attention back to the cake, trying to memorize every detail. She snuck a quick peak at Hopper as he unpacked the hamburger and swiped a finger through the frosting. She rolled the creamy goodness around with her tongue and nearly groaned. It tasted divine.

She looked back over her shoulder, expecting Hopper to send her out of the kitchen, only to find him pulling a folded piece of paper from his pocket. He stared at it for a long time, lost in deep in thought. It was the same look he'd had this morning when he'd inadvertently woken her up.

"Hopper," she asked, his eyes snapping up to focus on her, "something wrong?"

El could see the word "no" forming on his lips, the quick dismissal that no one believed but everyone usually let slide so as not to pry. But instead he stopped himself and blew out a long breath. There was a tremble in his hand as he reached into his pocket and slowly unfolded the piece of paper, smoothing it out against the counter before handing it to her.

"It's an early birthday present," he said by way of explanation. "At least...I hope. If you don't want it, I can find some way of changing it back. I'm not sure how, but I know it can happen. I probably should've at least talked with you about it first and I shouldn't have assumed – I just wanted to get you away from Brenner as soon as possible. I'm sorry that I didn't think beyond that."

El cocked her head and took the paper from Hopper. She wasn't sure what to think – he never rambled and almost always just told her exactly what he wanted. His anxiety made her pause, the happy freedom she'd experienced with the cake slowly replaced by prickling doubt.

She finally looked down at the paper and began to read, eyes easily finding the title.

State of Indiana....Certificate of Birth

She looked up, her nose scrunched in confusion. Certificate of Birth? Did Hopper make her birthday official or something? Could he do that?

The bigger man was still staring at her in wide-eyed anticipation, so she glanced back at the paper – maybe she'd missed something.

This certifies that according to the records of the State of Indiana...

Name: Jane Hopper

Was born in: Hawkins

Child of: Teresa Ives and Jim Hopper

Child of...that didn't make sense. Hopper knew who her parents were; he wasn't one of them. Unless...

It hit her with all the subtlety of Dustin on the dancefloor.

The paper fluttered to the ground, slipping through nerveless fingers. She wanted to look at it again, to make sure the words on the page were real...to ensure that she understood exactly what she was reading. Then Hopper was kneeling before her, hands on her shoulders.

"It's ok El. I...I made a mistake. I should've asked if this was something you wanted. I can fix it, don't worry. I mean, I know I'm not your real father but I just figured it was better to have someone who wasn't Brenner. Safer that way. It's ok, please don't cry."

El hadn't even realized the tears had begun to fall. They simply spilled over, unexpressed emotions, feelings, thoughts, words. She couldn't contain them even if she'd tried.

Misty eyed, she turned her attention back to Hopper. He was still talking, trying to undo a mistake.

He didn't understand.

He thought she didn't want him.

El had experienced enough rejection in her life to know how that felt. Hopper, she knew, had too. He protected himself with a gruff exterior, a standoffishness that drove people away and an uncaring manner that left most people shaking their head. Jim Hopper is a waste, they'd say. A bitter, hardened man with no joy outside of a cigarette and a bottle. A police chief whose only joy was transferring some of his misery onto others.

But El had seen the man through ups and down, good mornings and bad. He wasn't perfect and there was a certain part of him that enjoyed playing the bully. But that hardened, prickly shell protected a heart that had been battered and beaten, yet still had great capacity for love.

Love, not only for a wife who'd abandoned him and a daughter who hadn't been given enough time, but for her. And deep down, El knew she loved him too.

Her arms were around his neck before he could come up with another excuse, prickly beard pressed tightly against her cheek. She squeezed as hard as her small body allowed, trying to convey both *shut up, shut up, shut up* and *I love you, you mouthbreather* all at once.

Finally, she pulled away. When Hopper had stopped talking, she didn't know. But he looked at her now, eyes soft and heart breaking again.

"It's ok kid. I...I understand."

But El cut him off. "Stop."

He looked at her closely, confused.

She tried a reassuring smile, but with all the tears she imagined it came out more as a grimace.

"My choice." She said, "It's my choice."

Hopper nodded and El could see the shutters slowly closing, the walls that he built to protect himself falling back into place.

"I choose Jane Hopper."

El felt the big man's arms go slack then tighten around her as they lifted her up in a giant bear hug. A watery laugh of disbelief escaped as he lifted her off her feet. El returned the hug with equal vigor.

He set her down on the kitchen counter, narrowly avoiding the cake.

"You're sure? You really want this?"

El nodded, an uncontainable smile splitting her face. Tears played again at the corner of Hopper's eyes and El could see his mind racing, stumbling over all the words he wanted to say, the emotions pinwheeling around in his brain. It was overwhelming and at once intoxicating.

"Good," Hopper sniffed, pulling her into another hug. "Because I want you."

The rest of the evening was a blur, a haze of laughter, stories and celebration. Her birthday and her adoption day – she'd learned that word only after she'd blurted to Mike that Hopper was her actual dad now – were unforgettable. She'd come to think of these people as family long ago, but for everything to be official...well that was something that could never be taken from her. The brief kiss from Mike before he walked out the door was only the icing on the cake.

They cleaned up in companionable silence, enjoying each other's company and the cooling summer air. They didn't say much, but sometimes there really wasn't much to be said.

Before she knew it, she was yawning and Hopper was shooin' her off to bed.

"Get some rest kid," he said with a wink. "Glad it was a fun night."

El returned the smile. "Night dad."

Day 295

RING!

"El, c'mon! We can't be late on the first day!"

But El was frozen in a sea of people, a deserted island, a boat tossed by a storm. Colors flashed everywhere – red jackets, green shirts, blue backpacks. A ridiculous orange hat with a stylized tiger roaring across its front. Kids were talking, yelling, connecting with friends they hadn't seen in months. It was almost too much for her to process.

She felt herself take an inadvertent step back toward the curb, toward the Bronco Hopper had just used to drop her off. She thought she was ready for school, that after the Demogorgon and the Mind Flayer it would be an easy adjustment.

"El!"

Mike's hand was on her shoulder, sliding down into her own. His unruly mop of overlong black hair fluttered in the breeze, sticking up this way and that. El resisted to the urge to reach out and push a stray strand from his face.

"You alright?"

She forced herself to nod, a little too overwhelmed to speak.

"C'mon," Mike said again, tugging her toward the school building. "The guys are over there. We'll show you your locker and go to algebra together. We've all got Mr. Hart."

El took a deep breath, feeling some of the tension leave her chest. This was Mike, and if Mike said it was going to be ok then she believed him. His eyes glowed with excitement – with relief at seeing her this morning. He hadn't shut up for weeks about how great it would be to finally have her at school. He wanted to show her everything, to not have to keep her a secret.

Mike leaned in and brushed his lips against her cheek. A warm, tingly feeling suffused her body. She liked these kisses; she wanted more each day.

Will, Dustin and Lucas whooped in the background, and Max rolled her eyes, a skateboard tossed casually over her shoulder.

"Let's go!" Mike blushed, his embarrassment not enough to keep him from holding on to her hand.

But El's eyes were on Mike. The shy grin, shoulder lifted in a half-shrug as if to say *What can you do?* He was still the same Mike and this was just a new chapter in their story.

She turned and waved to her dad – that word still took a bit to get

used to. Hopper returned the gesture with a smile before shifting the Bronco into gear.

She followed Mike into the school, smiling at his chatterbox commentary, her hand in his.

He showed her the lockers, reviewed the combination lock (it really wasn't that tricky after you'd done it a time or two), and they grabbed their algebra textbooks. Before she knew it, they were seated in class, side by side. Will on Mike's right, Dustin, Lucas and Max in a line behind.

They talked for a minute until the bell sounded and Mr. Hart got up to take attendance.

El watched him closely as he worked his way down the list and approached her name. She was a bit nervous about speaking in class, but Mike had been kind enough to coach her through it.

Jane Hopper? Mr. Hart finally called.

She raised a hand.

"It's El."

Please review!